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Inside the Post's Pelton story

Washington Post executive editor Ben Bradlee says paper knew details of top secret info eight months before it published story

The *Washington Post* knew the details of top secret U.S. intelligence gathering capabilities which convicted spy Ronald Pelton sold to the Soviets as early as September 1985, according to executive editor Benjamin Bradlee.

In a June 8 article in the newspaper's *Sunday Outlook* section, Bradlee explained the editorial process, including numerous meetings over several months with top-level government officials, that led to the publication on May 28 of its story by Bob Woodward and Patrick Tyler about the communications intelligence operation that Pelton revealed to the Soviets.

Earlier in May, Central Intelligence Director William J. Casey threatened the Post with criminal prosecution if it published the story, and President Reagan had telephoned Katharine Graham, chairman of the Washington Post Co., with an appeal that it not be published on national security grounds.

Bradlee also revealed that the Post has withheld information from more than a dozen stories so far this year because of national security concerns. He wrote that the Post could not supply a list of the withheld information "without violating the national security interests that led me to withhold publication."

Bradlee wrote that in September 1985 reporter Bob Woodward came into his office and laid out every detail of the intelligence gathering operation except Pelton's name.

"Woodward didn't have Pelton's name because no American knew for sure at that point that a man named Pelton had sold this intelligence gold mine to the Russians five years earlier," Bradlee stated.

Without knowledge of Pelton, the Post "had no knowledge that every detail of our story was already known to the Russians," Bradlee explained. "We thought we had the highest national security secret any of us had ever heard. There was never any thought given to publishing any of this information."

Bradlee wrote that, in a meeting with publisher Donald E. Graham, he (Bradlee) even considered telling

President Reagan what the Post had learned.

"While the administration was beating the press upside the head for run-of-the-mill leaks, truly important national security information was floating around town."

The idea of seeking a meeting with the President was scrapped because it "would inevitably appear as too self-serving and grandstanding," Bradlee stated.

After Pelton was arrested on November 24, the Post began to consider running the story with information on what he had sold to the Soviets.

On December 5, 1985, Bradlee and Post managing editor Leonard Downie met with Gen. William Odom, head of the National Security Agency, and two of his staff to discuss the information the Post possessed.

"We said we felt extremely uncomfortable with this information, but we had it, the Russians had it, and we asked why it should be kept from the American people."

Odom's reply, according to Bradlee, was that information was still highly sensitive and that the U.S. still was unsure of how much the Soviets knew. Odom told the Post editors the U.S. was hoping Pelton would plead guilty and avoid a public trial of the evidence against him.

What followed the Odom meeting was five months of meetings with current and former government officials as the Post "tried to frame a story that would tell the American people what the Russians already knew, and only what they already knew."

"We were determined not to violate the legitimate security of the nation, but we were equally determined not to be browbeaten by the administration."

At many of these meetings, the Post went so far as to show government officials different versions of the story, Bradlee said. Each time the officials invoked national security in arguing against publications.

The Post's editors were convinced national security was not involved, but they were "not 1,000% convinced that the Soviets knew every detail" of

the story, "and publication was delayed."

It was at a May 1 breakfast meeting to show Odom the "penultimate version" of the story that the NSA chief for the first time mentioned the government was looking into prosecuting the Post if it published the Pelton story. The 1950 law, 18 United States Code 798, makes it a crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine to publish any classified information about devices used for communication intelligence.

The next day, May 2, Bradlee received a car-telephone call from CIA director Casey. The two agreed to meet at 4 p.m. at the University Club. Casey was shown the story, Bradlee related, and told Bradlee and managing editor Downie that he would recommend prosecution of the Post if it published the story.

Casey told Bradlee that the CIA already had "five absolutely cold violations" of 18 U.S.C. 798 by the Post, *New York Times*, *Washington Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Nine days after the meeting with Casey, Katharine Graham received a call from President Reagan who told her publishing the Pelton story would endanger national security.

"That was the last red light," Bradlee stated. "The Post withheld the story one last time and started work immediately on a version that removed all the 'wiring diagram' detail of the intelligence system, all the details that might be prohibited by the statute."

Bradlee recounted that as "a courtesy" to President Reagan, the Post contacted press secretary Larry Speakes on May 27 that it was going to run the story the next day, without the wiring diagram details but also "unread" in advance "by any government official."

The editor noted that some of the deleted details were later disclosed in testimony at Pelton's trial "where the government laid out more information in a public forum about its most secret intelligence gathering capabilities than at any time since World War II."

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The same day the story appeared, Casey told the Post the CIA was studying the story to see if it should be referred to the Justice Department for possible prosecution.

"And there the matter lay until a few days later, in the middle of the Pelton trial, Casey and Odom issued a joint statement warning the press against speculating about the Pelton evidence, implicitly threatening prosecution if they did," Bradlee said.

"Warnings against speculation are the fabric of a *Pravda* editor's life. They are anathema in a free society, and they were greeted as such by the American press on this occasion."

Bradlee concluded that the dispute with the Reagan administration over the Pelton story was typical behavior of a government under stress.

"In moments of stress between government and the press — and these moments have come and gone since Thomas Jefferson — the government looks for ways to control the press, to eliminate or minimize the press as an obstacle in the implementation of policy, or the solution of problems.

"In these moments, especially, the press must continue its mission of publishing information that it — and it alone — determines to be in the public interest in a useful, timely and responsible manner — serving society, not government."